

Afghanistan in Transition

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In December 2010, President Obama issued his review of the US strategy in Afghanistan following the significant increase in military forces and a renewed counterinsurgency effort. Nearly a year ago, the US Commander in Chief decided to send an additional 30,000 US forces to Afghanistan as part of a strategy to reverse the Taliban's momentum and build the Afghan government's capacity, allowing the United States to begin drawing down its forces in July 2011.¹ The ensuing military surge, which raised the level of the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to over 140,000 (including 100,000 US service members), and a new population-centered stabilization strategy may be the first serious counterinsurgency effort in the nine-year war.

During the past nine years, poorly resourced and ill-coordinated state building and stabilization efforts failed to check the growing insecurity and violence that peaked this year at the highest level since the removal of the Taliban from power in 2001. The ever-increasing complexity of the strategic and operational environment has perplexed the Afghan government and contributing nations and stymied the development of any unified, long-term vision for the nation and its people. All parties have approached the emerging issues in divergent, uncoordinated ways, with operations on every front being fragmented reactions to events rather than strategic undertakings designed to support long-term goals. An American warrior of the Vietnam War famously once said that America had not been fighting the war in Vietnam for 12 years, but for one year 12 times.² The same can be said in Afghanistan today where the international forces have fought nine, one-year wars.

The December review came amid growing doubts over a war that has dragged on for almost a decade with no clear prospects for winning. The extension of Taliban influence into once stable areas in the West and North of the country, rising casualties among US-NATO forces and Afghan civilians, the weakening of Afghan government control, and waiving belief in President Karzai's commitment to eliminate official corruption and improve

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governance have ebbed public support in America and NATO capitals to its lowest level. These trends increasingly find reflection in policy-making circles in the United States and the European nations that are providing forces. There are calls for a major change in the US commitment in Afghanistan as there are warnings that an unrealistic drawdown of international forces and a minimalist approach will lead to greater instability in the region.

So the real challenge is how to deal with this conflict in a way that averts an everlasting US-military entanglement and curbs transnational security threats emanating from the region. The mainstream strategic approach includes building Afghanistan's local capacity for security responsibilities and shaping a strategic environment that is conducive to regional peace and stability.

This article looks at the short-term prospects of a sustainable transition of security responsibility under a renewed US-ISAF strategy and the transition's long-term impact on peace and stability in and around Afghanistan.

Challenges and Opportunities

The main challenge facing Afghanistan is how to deal with a growing insurgency while the government is weakening and its foreign support is wavering. Responding to these challenges requires measures to lower the threat level and Afghanistan's capacity to respond to threats. These measures are directly linked. No amount of military power, foreign or domestic, will gain much unless the Afghan government improves its capacity to control its territory, win the trust of the people, and prevent infiltration and subversion from abroad. The success of a US-led counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan is closely linked to a partnership with an effective Afghan government.

Afghanistan has made notable achievements in rebuilding its state institutions, adopting a modern constitution, holding peaceful elections, creating national security institutions, improving women's rights, and expanding educational institutions. Yet the government and its international partners failed to sustain and build on these accomplishments. They missed opportunities to establish long-term stability, opting instead for short-term deals with non-state powers concerned only with their own interests. The result is a weak government's with incompetent security forces and a poor and corrupt system of justice.

Weakness of state institutions is the principle cause of the government ineffectiveness and debility. Although President Karzai is the elected leader of the country, he lacks the credible institutional and political muscle to offset the influence of non-statuary power brokers. He does not have a strong political base and has neither a political party nor a cohesive political

team to govern. While President Karzai is an ethnic Pashtun, he does not command tribal support of all Pashtuns; consequently, his policy of choice is often accommodating the power brokers in governance. Following failures to invest sufficiently in building state institutions combined with the rise of insurgency since 2006 has caused the weak Afghan government to rely increasingly on corruption-infested, non-state, patronage networks. The government opted to strike a balance between justice and the exigencies of stability; therefore, the main actors on the Afghan political scene include weak state institutions, strong insurgents, and opportunistic, non-state powerbrokers. Even some US field commanders in southern Afghanistan are adopting a strategy that increasingly places the priority on fighting the Taliban even if that means tolerating some level of corruption. Military officials in the region have concluded that the Taliban's insurgency is the most pressing threat to stability and a sweeping effort to drive out corruption might create chaos and a governance vacuum the Taliban could exploit.³

The current situation promotes corruption that permeates not only the governance but also the political and economic sectors and has become a major hurdle to achieving security and development. Insufficient investment and irresolute commitment to the establishment of the rule of law has fostered a culture of impunity. Without rule of law, the political scene, including the elections, became a playground for people with guns and money inside and outside the government. Similarly the emerging free market economy is dominated by different shades of mafia. The financial turmoil faced by Afghanistan's leading private bank (the Kabul Bank) in September is a microcosm of graft-infested, private sector institutions. The institutional problems that triggered a run on the bank were caused by word leaking out that top directors and major shareholders of the financial institution made hundreds of millions of dollars in, often clandestine, loans to themselves and Afghan government insiders.

The Afghan government's weakness and its growing unpopularity are widely exploited by the Taliban in an effort to win by means of discrediting the Kabul regime and the regime's foreign supporters. While insurgents may suffer from indirect military encounters with the ISAF and Afghan military forces, the insurgents have significantly enhanced their capacities. Thanks to al Qaeda and other foreign supporters' technical and logistical assistance, the insurgents are expanding their use of more sophisticated improvised explosive device and suicide bombers.⁴ Disadvantaged by a garrison mentality and limited mobility outside the wire, the attitude of government security posts

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provides freedom of action even for small groups of militants that roam the villages and influence the unprotected population. The Taliban do not have to occupy space to control it. The fear of their brutal actions control the population's behavior. The militants have also intensified their intimidation campaign with targeted assassinations of influential political, tribal, and religious leaders, who could be instrumental in expanding the writ of the government in rural areas, thereby contributing to peace and stability. The parliamentary election in September clearly proved that despite the insurgents' threats and widespread attempts to disrupt the polls, they were unable to halt the election process. Taliban strength comes mainly from the government's weakness and passivity.

Although more than 70 percent of civilian deaths are caused by the Taliban attacks, the insurgents highlight and magnify incidents of civilian casualties caused by NATO military operations, stoking public resentment, which is often expressed in protests and demonstrations.⁵ The Taliban also coerce people into identifying militants killed in NATO bombings as civilian casualties.⁶ Through a systematic strategic communication program, the insurgents try to convince people that NATO is losing the fight and will soon redeploy, leaving the Taliban as the only formidable force in the country. Some of the Taliban's recent successes in the North and West are thought to be a direct result of this misinformation offensive.

The US strategy will have a decisive impact on any prospects for success in short-term transition as well as the long-term stability in Afghanistan. President Obama's December review examined the need for the continuation or adjustment of the counterinsurgency strategy, directly impacting the pace and level of the impending drawdown. Regardless of any announced intention and pace of the July 2011 drawdown, the deadline has become part of the strategic calculus for America's allies, the Afghan government and people, the Taliban, Afghanistan's neighbors, and other regional actors. In a committed strategic effort, force drawdown is dictated by operational realities. Imposing time constraints on operations in an uncertain, dynamic environment sends messages of impending weakness. The perception of waning international resolve has boosted insurgents' confidence that they can win and provides little incentive for them to support any peace talks. It has lowered the morale of the population that does not support the Taliban's return to power, causing many to reconsider casting their lot with the eventual winner. This perception also drives regional actors toward a hedging strategy and it impedes any hope of effective cooperation in stabilizing Afghanistan.

There are, however, emerging opportunities to respond to these ongoing challenges. Now is the first time in the post-Taliban period that sufficient resources are available and there is a sound strategy the US-led

NATO forces have adopted not only to stem the growth of the insurgency but also to build the Afghan government's capacity to take ownership and leadership of state building and stabilization operations.⁷ This strategy argues for a measured drawdown of US forces this summer and the compelling need to give the strategy sufficient time to accomplish tangible results.⁸ The new strategy already demonstrated its ability to weaken the insurgents in Helmand, Kandahar, and parts of greater Paktiya provinces.⁹

During the Kabul International Conference on July 20, 2010, the Afghan government pledged to implement a new "whole of the state" and "whole of government" approach to national renewal. The essence of the "whole of the state" approach is constitutionalism—to strengthen each of the three branches of the government and reinforce the constitutional checks and balances that guarantee and enforce citizen rights and obligations. The essence of the "whole of government" approach is structural reform—to create an effective, accountable, and transparent government that can deliver services to the population and safeguard national interests. Together, these complementary approaches, by putting people at the core, are the key to stability and prosperity.¹⁰ Progress in these processes depends on creating opportunities for success by pursuing current military operations for a few more years. Unless such a continuation of the strategy occurs, no government initiatives will succeed and the lives of the citizenry will be negatively impacted. It is only through successful governance that the international community and Afghan government can achieve their ultimate counterinsurgency goal—to make the Taliban and their allies irrelevant.

Alternative Strategies

There is increasing domestic pressure by various factions in the United States and other NATO countries for drastic changes to the current US strategy, but these groups offer no credible alternative. There really is not any strong justification for giving up the current counterinsurgency strategy that was earnestly implemented less than a year ago and just recently allocated sufficient resources. The growing perception among the Afghan people, however, is that ISAF is losing the war, a perception that undermines the US counterinsurgency effort even before it is given time to succeed. Some have suggested alternative, minimalist approaches that are, in fact, defeat in disguise and merely an attempt to put a good face on failure. Other groups and factions tend to oversimplify the political-strategic challenge in an attempt to justify overly simplistic solutions.

In August, a report by the so-called Afghan Study Group led by Matthew Hoh, the Marine officer who resigned from the State Department in protest of Obama's policies last year, called on the president to bring a

majority of US forces home, abandoning any attempt to defeat the Taliban.¹¹ The report stressed that al Qaeda, the main target of US military intervention, is no longer a significant presence in Afghanistan. Based on various twisted interpretations of history and inconsistency of argument, the report claims that American interests in Afghanistan do not warrant the current level of sacrifice. The Afghanistan Study Group fails to propose a means for ending the war, suggesting instead that any drawdown of US forces would also be accompanied by a plan that tens of thousands of American forces would remain in Afghanistan for years.

A report by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) suggests that Western powers should modify their strategy to focus on “containment and deterrence” of al Qaeda and the Taliban instead of placing extraordinary efforts on failed attempts at nation-building.¹² Conceptually, containment and deterrence can hardly work against enemies who are transnational, have no specific geographic boundaries, and practice unconventional and asymmetrical methods of warfare. The “disrupting, dismantling, and defeating [of] al Qaeda” in the region and preventing its return, as outlined in current US policy, require building a viable government in Afghanistan, one capable of controlling its territory.¹³ Only by building a stable government can we expect to achieve the eradication of violence and terrorism, and ensure that these gains are capable of being sustained. Given the lessons of the recent past when the United States focused solely on a counterterrorism strategy following the removal of Taliban, any minimalist approach or scaled-down commitment would simply prolong the violence and eventually fail, leading to serious consequences for regional stability and international security. The IISS-suggested strategy has been vehemently disputed by another credible UK-based institution, the Henry Jackson Society. This institution believes that the conflict in Afghanistan “can and must be won,” and that can only be accomplished through the continuation of a strong counterinsurgency strategy.¹⁴

Some of the arguments that underpin a minimalist approach contradict ground realities. For example, some suggest that al Qaeda, the main reason for America’s invasion, is no longer in Afghanistan. They espouse a belief that the presence of foreign soldiers is resented by the population, a resentment giving the Taliban reason to continue fighting; they also believe there is no solution to the continuing conflict. These individuals and groups take the usual clichés out of context and use them to justify a number of misconceptions. These include: Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires; efforts to centralize power in Afghanistan provoke local resistance; and Afghanistan is an ethnically fragmented and decentralized country incapable of forming a unified state.

The realities within Afghanistan provide a radically different picture. There may, in fact, be a limited number of al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan today, but their influence has significantly increased due to improved political, technical, psychological, and transnational logistical support. Qualitatively, al Qaeda is more efficient and effective in its support to the various insurgent groups, even more successful than in the 1990s when the terrorist network was based in Afghanistan. Despite public resentment of collateral damages and the loss of life caused by military operations, there is still enormous support for the presence of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan.¹⁵ It is probably true that there is no military solution to this conflict; however, the fact remains that this war can be lost through lack of military effort.

There are also calls for the decentralization of power and weakening of the central government, ceding parts of the country to Taliban forces under a peace agreement. Such a plan would, in fact, look like a de facto balkanization of the country. While all these foreign-based plans and suggestions are sincere attempts at resolving the main issues underlying the conflict, they only address the symptoms of the instability and fail to deal with the root causes. Unfortunately, during the past three decades, imposition of solutions by outsiders have not only brought instability but also frustrated the traditional political dynamics in Afghanistan, that of keeping the multi-ethnic nation together under a state possessing the power to maintain equilibrium and exercise compromises.

Historically, Afghanistan has been a strong nation and a weak state. The central government was traditionally weak, but the peripheries were even weaker, favoring the presence of a central authority as a power balancer and political arbitrator. Despite its ethnic diversity, the Afghan nation has shown surprising strength, resilience, and viability in the recent past, with no trace of secessionist threats. For most of the last century, relative peace coupled with foreign assistance has helped Afghanistan to establish modern state institutions and economic infrastructure, both of which facilitated national integration and expanded the writ of the central government throughout the country. Kabul's lack of capacity and resources has hindered its ability to respond effectively to the periphery's needs for services and has left the more traditional power structures and informal conflict resolution institutions intact. Kabul often supplements these formal institutions with resources without directly competing with them. These informal structures are particularly active in the tribal areas. The country's nationhood is based more on what Ernest Renan terms a "will" to persist together rather than on common ethnicity, language, or tribal affiliation. In terms of ethnic affiliation, tribal divisions, clan networks, social divisions, and regional solidarity,

the Afghan society is mostly atomized. Paradoxically, it is this atomization that guards against disintegration and compartmentalization.

Obviously, the breakdown of central authority during three decades of conflict stimulated a sociopolitical transformation that vitalized regional patronage networks under the leadership of regional commanders, many of whom invoked ethnic ties to legitimize their leadership. This situation, in the absence of a strong central government, fueled ethno-regional competition for power and resources. Long-term stability in Afghanistan is dependent on the central government's ability to manage this divisive situation rather than adopting solutions that only accommodate existing fragmentation. Accommodation of traditional power structures and ethnic groups has to be sought through democratic participation, political and economic integration, and the development of society and the private sector in such a manner as to mitigate the negative impacts of competing group interests.

The Strategy of Transition

A new roadmap for Afghanistan was adopted by the London International Conference in January 2010, the highlights of which include transitioning security responsibility to Afghan control, significant institutional enhancement of Afghanistan's national security capacity, and supporting the Afghan government's national reconciliation plan.¹⁶ The meeting launched a process known as the *Kabul Process*, which is Afghan-led and aimed at accelerating Afghanistan's ability to govern itself, reducing Afghanistan's dependence on the international community, enhancing its security forces, and providing better protection for the rights of all its citizens. The process, which also included convening the National Consultative Peace Jirga in June 2010, culminated in the Kabul International Conference in July where the Afghan government outlined the details of the transition under Afghan leadership.¹⁷ The Kabul Conference endorsed a new, three-year *Prioritization and Implementation Plan* that builds on the 2008 Afghanistan National Development Strategy. The new plan establishes Afghan national priorities in five critical areas: security, governance and the rule of law, economic and social development, reconciliation and reintegration, and regional cooperation.

The success of such an Afghanization strategy depends on resources, sound Afghan leadership, coordinated international partnership, and, most importantly, time. The *Kabul Process* is built on deep and broad international partnerships and long-term international support as Afghanistan continues to develop its indigenous capacity for a responsible and sustainable transition. Given the local and regional political and security dynamics, the transition process is going to be multi-dimensional, complex, and nonlinear.

It requires an integrated approach that combines the military strategy with political and developmental strategies. A political strategy of negotiation should not be seen as an alternative approach but rather as a complementing effort. There is an ongoing debate regarding the development of a strategy based on whether negotiating with the Taliban should be adopted as the political policy supported by a military strategy (as preferred by the Europeans) or should the emphasis be on a military strategy of choice that forces the Taliban to the negotiating table (the strategy supported by US military commanders). In the first strategy, the pace of troop withdrawal will be determined by the progress in negotiations with the Taliban. In the latter case, the pace of progress in talks will be determined by the progress on the battlefield.

These two strategies should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. It is clear, however, that as long as withdrawal is the centerpiece of any strategic approach, the Taliban and its supporters are not going to have any incentive to negotiate. Meanwhile, without taking advantage of military gains to establish conditions for negotiations, peace will remain elusive. Historically, negotiated ends of insurgencies have all taken an extended amount of time and were conducted in concert with actions on the battlefield. So, in either strategy, negotiations and fighting are likely to go on simultaneously for an extended time and until an environment conducive to a sustainable settlement is achieved.

Transition Mechanisms

The Kabul Conference endorsed the Afghan government's plan, developed in concert with NATO, based on mutually-agreed criteria and the phased transition to full Afghan responsibility for security, as outlined in the technical transition paper. It further endorsed a decision-making process of the Government of Afghanistan (GOA) and the North Atlantic Council (NAC). The GOA and NATO/ISAF jointly assessed the provinces with the aim of announcing by the end of 2010 the process of transition was underway.¹⁸ President Karzai made a commitment that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) "should lead and conduct military operations in all provinces by the end of 2014." This entire process is predicated on assistance from the international community in an effort to help Afghanistan generate security forces capable of assuming this responsibility.

The effective and sustainable transition of security requires creating security, governance, and developmental capacities, and shaping the local and regional environment to reduce threat levels, win the trust of the population, and facilitate and promote regional cooperation. The main obstacles to achieving this transition are a growing insurgency, weak state institutions,

ineffective and corrupt governance, difficulties in expanding the quantity and quality of Afghan security forces, and the diverging strategic interests of Afghanistan's neighbors. Building the capacity of ANSF requires three key elements:

- Professional and institutional capability.
- Capacity to function in an unstable and insurgent environment.
- Simultaneous development of other government institutions.

Following President Obama's December 2009 speech on Afghanistan strategy, the NATO Training Mission (NTM-A) and Combined Security Transition Command (CSTC-A) in Afghanistan set the priorities to accelerate growth of the Afghan National Army (ANA) to 134,000 by October 2010, along with the reform and expansion of the Afghan National Police (ANP) to 109,000. Future plans call for expanding the ANA to 171,600 and ANP to 134,000 by October 2011. The expansion target for 2013 is 240,000 for the ANA and 160,000 for the ANP. Total ANSF strength in December 2009 was 191,969 and is programmed for an increase to 305,600 by October 2011 and 400,000 by 2013.

The ANA reached its targeted strength for 2010 ahead of schedule. It is expected that ANSF will meet the future deadlines in term of numbers, but it is unclear whether the numerical increase will be matched in terms of effectiveness. According to LTG William B. Caldwell, the head of NTM-A, desertion is a major problem. In order to add 56,000 more individuals to the force by next fall, some 141,000 individuals will have to be recruited and trained.¹⁹ But, there is no accurate estimate on when Kabul might assume control in even the more peaceful parts of the country. President Barack Obama expects US forces will begin redeploying in July 2011, with conditions on the ground determining how many forces can leave and how fast. Marine Corps Commandant General James Conway recently said that transition of security responsibility to Afghan forces, particularly in the south, will take several years.²⁰

While the capacity to provide mentors and partnership with Afghan forces has significantly improved, the real challenge is building the capabilities of the army and police within the time constraints. Planned expansion of ANSF requires provision of added training facilities, funds, and trainers, as well as imaginative leadership at every level. Meeting these requirements in proportion to the planned increase of ANA to 240,000 by 2013 requires the mobilization of enormous resources that are unlikely to occur within the announced timeframe. Meanwhile, the political process needs to maintain the capacity to deal with a wide range of obstacles, including budgetary constraints, pay and benefit costs, ethnic, tribal and corruption issues, and Taliban infiltration.

The development of the ANP faces more serious challenges than the ANA. In the Afghan environment, the ANP is expected to perform a variety of counterinsurgency, security, law enforcement, border protection, counterterrorism, and counternarcotics missions. Further, police performance is closely linked to the effectiveness of governance and justice sector. Most of the ANP lack the capacity to support counterinsurgency operations where protection of local population is a key element.

In order to boost the capacity for security, the ISAF and Afghanistan government decided to create an up-to-10,000-strong Afghan Local Police (ALP) force for securing public installations, preventing armed opposition infiltration, and providing favorable space for governance and development. Raised locally in threatened areas, the ALP is a security force that only performs guard duties and does not conduct law enforcement activities. The initiative entails opportunities and risks. If properly selected and closely controlled, the village guards will help; otherwise, the program could add to problems caused by existing, illegally armed groups. There are a number of safeguards in place. The police officers are recruited, trained, paid, and controlled by provincial and district police departments in close consultation with and vetted by local *shuras*. They serve where they live and use their weapons to defend the local populace.²¹

No credible military capacity can be developed in a vacuum. Legitimate security forces are created by a state whose citizens view it as legitimate and worth fighting for. Building security capacities is not simply an exercise of generating more and more army (*Kandaks*) or police units. It requires the security forces to be developed in the context of an integrated civil-military, institution-building effort. The development of the Afghan National Army and National Police without regard to the other weaknesses in the Afghan government, such as the rule of law, corruption, and the influence of non-state power brokers, will seriously undermine the effectiveness of the force no matter how numerically strong it may be. Efforts should be focused on consolidating various institutions in an attempt to curb the influence of power brokers; otherwise, government and civil institutions will continue to serve the personal and group interests of non-state actors.

Reintegration and Reconciliation

The Kabul Conference “welcomed and endorsed in principle the Afghan government’s *Peace and Reintegration Program* (APRP), which is open to all Afghan members of the armed opposition and their communities who renounce violence, have no links to international terrorist organizations, respect the constitution, and are willing to join in building a peaceful Afghanistan.”²² The international community reiterated its commitment

to support this endeavor through the Peace and Reintegration Trust Fund. Kabul's reintegration and reconciliation initiative is based on principles endorsed by a 1,600-member National Consultative Peace *Jirga* that met in Kabul in June 2010 and unanimously called for resolution of the ongoing conflict through negotiations with the armed opposition.²³ The Taliban leadership has, so far, either rejected calls for reconciliation or added conditions that the Afghan government and its international partners deem unacceptable.

Ideas that are under consideration regarding the APRP look at tactical level reintegration efforts focused on the foot soldiers and local leaders who form the bulk of the insurgency. Efforts at the strategic level focus on the Taliban and insurgents' leadership. By necessity, this is a complex and highly sensitive process necessitating a broad approach. The program for this level may include: the problems of sanctuaries, measures for outreach and removal from the UN sanction list, ensuring that individuals and organizations break links to al Qaeda, and the securement of political accommodation or exile in a third country.

The goal of the APRP is to promote peace through the political process. It encourages regional and international cooperation, sets political and judicial conditions for peace and reconciliation, and encourages combatant soldiers, commanders, and leaders, who previously sided with the opposition, to renounce violence and terrorism and join in a constructive process of reintegration and peace. There are certain obstacles in the way of integration that may influence the results even as the process continues. These obstacles include the trust deficit and the diverse motivations that drive individuals to fight (ideological, political, social, personal, and economic). In the absence of security and trusted governance, the process's potential for failure could be influenced by a collapse of compact, local rivalries, increased corruption, and loss of credibility.

Negotiation with the insurgents is simply a means to an end. Hopefully, the end is a peace settlement supported by all parties, a settlement that is sustainable and will not sow the seeds for renewed conflict. Any settlement needs to address grievances that fueled the insurgency, such as corruption, injustice, political exclusion, and marginalization. Such an accord is not just about a deal with the Taliban or Pakistan. The settlement should clearly define an end state that Afghans are willing to support. Covert talks with the Taliban could alienate a goodly portion of the country's leadership and be extremely divisive. It may simply be a futile attempt, as the insurgents have not indicated they are ready to talk. The lack of public trust in the Kabul government and deepening suspicions among the Afghan political forces require multi-level negotiations that are a part of any peace talk strategy.

Afghanistan's neighbors and other regional powers can be obstacles or solutions to the country's problems. Progress requires stability in Afghanistan as an extension of the strategic priorities of other nations. Regional interference and intervention in Afghanistan will continue as long as the country remains unstable and the prospect for stability is elusive. The presence of insurgents' safe havens in Pakistan is one of the obstacles to progress. Attaining a level of stability should convince insurgents' foreign supporters that the situation has reached beyond a "stalemate" and is in the process of facilitating regional cooperation to stabilize Afghanistan. No regional approach, however, can be fully effective without the efforts of other major powers (NATO, the United States, China, India, and Russia) involved in the region.

Conclusion

Sustainable stability based on democratic principles is a prerequisite for regional stability and Afghanistan's political future. This requires a long-term commitment. But a long-term, state-building process can be hindered by short-term political agendas, perilous short-cuts, and militarization of development. Reconciliation, reintegration, and development of the Afghanistan government's capacity to assume security responsibilities are all elements of a sound and rational transition strategy. Now is the first time in the post-Taliban period that sufficient resources are available, and that US-led NATO forces have adopted a strategy that not only stems the growth of the insurgency but also builds the Afghan government's capacity to assume ownership and leadership of all the state-building and stabilization operations. There is a compelling need to provide sufficient time for the strategy to accomplish tangible results, including the measured drawdown of US forces in 2011. The success of the American counterinsurgency strategy is closely linked to a partnership with a stable and effective Afghan government.

To improve government effectiveness in the short-term, there is a critical need to enhance the president's office by establishing a decision-making capability with the power to delegate authority to other capable governmental bodies. We need to ensure, however, that too much authority is not placed in the president's office, especially if there is an absence of bureaucratic capacity to exercise it effectively and efficiently. This retention of authority can undermine leadership as well as reduce the planning and exercise of strategic guidance. Such a centralization of power makes the high-level, decision-making process extremely slow and convoluted, tailored to individual needs, arbitrary, injudicious, and incapable of orchestrating governmental operations. Reforming the system requires the

establishment of strong strategic planning bodies in the form of high councils for national security, governance, and economic affairs with the capacity to plan, coordinate, and lead the implementation of strategy and any associated programs. This strategy needs to encompass all the components associated with stability operations (security, governance, rule of law, and economic development). The councils should also be capable of coordinating strategic issues with international stakeholders in and outside of Afghanistan.

In the interest of fostering a viable political process, the political landscape should be opened to promote the emergence of nation-wide political parties. These parties could focus on a national agenda to offset the patronage networks that have emerged from the civil war and ethnic alignments presently dominating the political scene. The opening of the political process will help sustain the gains that have been made to this point, support the emergence of young leaders, and ensure greater participation and political representation by a range of previously excluded political actors, economic and business elites, and the disenfranchised from various tribal and ethnic groups.

NOTES

1. President Barack Obama, “Obama’s Address on the War in Afghanistan” (address, US Military Academy, West Point, NY, December 1, 2009), transcription published in *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/02/world/asia/02prexy.text.html#>.
2. John Paul Vann (July 2, 1924 – June 9, 1972) was a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army, who later retired and became well-known for his role in the Vietnam War. He tried to push the Army away from massive bombardment and toward counterinsurgency against the Viet Cong. Vann died when his helicopter crashed in the jungle.
3. Greg Jaffe, “Abiding Some Afghan Graft,” *Washington Post*, (September 4, 2010).
4. Elders from Kandahar and Helmand provinces, in discussion with the author. According to many people in the South, the Taliban tax each village to supply a certain number of empty oil tins monthly which are used for making IEDs.
5. United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, *Afghanistan: Mid Year Report 2010: Protection of Civilian in Armed Conflict* (Kabul, Afghanistan, August 2010). According to this report, the recorded number of civilian deaths in the first six months of 2010 by parties to the conflict was 1,271 of which 920 were caused by the Taliban (72%), 220 by pro-government forces (18%), and 128 (10%) by undetermined parties.
6. Elders from the Ghazni province, in discussion with the author, July 2010. In some cases, the militants are said to remove weapon and ammunition belts from their dead comrades on the battle area and ask people to describe them as civilians. This process is locally called “civilianization of dead.”
7. Rajiv Chandrasekaran, “Petraeus Calls Strategy in Afghanistan Sound,” *Washington Post*, (August 16, 2010).
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